

# Online Communication: Problems and Prospects

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For billions of people, the internet has become a second home. It is where we meet friends and strangers, where we organise and learn, debate, deceive, and do business. In some respects, it is like the town square it was once claimed to be, while in others, it provides a strange new mode of interaction whose influence on us we are yet to understand. This collection of papers aims to give a short indication of some of the exciting philosophical work being carried out at the moment that addresses the novel aspects of online communication. The topics range from the expressive functions of emoji to the oppressive powers of search engines.

One of the most interesting linguistic developments in digital communication has been the incorporation of emoji into online speech. After surveying the history of emoji, from emoticons to the Unicode standard, Lucy McDonald's paper 'Making Sense of Emoji' asks the deceptively simple question 'what are emoji?' Perhaps unsurprisingly, this question doesn't offer a simple answer. As McDonald points out, it would be hasty to identify emoji with the images that appear on a given platform, as these images will vary (e.g., Apple's U+1FAE3 'Face with Peeking Eye' 🙈 has a closed mouth with a hint of a smile while Microsoft's version has its mouth agape in horror 😱.) Drawing upon work in the philosophy of art, McDonald defends a distinction between emoji and their renderings (which are visible to us), arguing that the different renderings of emoji are akin to performances of a piece of music.

With matters of ontology settled, McDonald then turns to function and identifies three distinct functions that different emoji serve. The first kind of function is replicative, taking over the role of traditional linguistic expressions like words, or expressive tools like punctuation. In this role, emoji can help us perform illocutionary acts. The second function is compensatory. In this capacity, emoji help to make up for some of the non-verbal cues that are lost in the shift to online methods of communication; they convey emotion, irony, and perform non-verbal gestures. Finally, and most interestingly, McDonald argues that emoji may have supplementary functions. For example, the

use of emoji in online communication can serve as politeness indicators helping receivers preserve face and softening the effect of messages.

The internet is not merely a source of new forms of expression but of information and three of the papers consider this epistemic dimension of the Internet. Joey Pollock's 'Epistemic Bubbles and Contextual Discordance' builds on work by C. Thi Nguyen to argue that the problem of epistemic bubbles on the internet is worse than philosophers may have realised. An epistemic bubble, as Nguyen defines it, is a structure in which relevant voices have been left out (perhaps accidentally). It can be your Facebook community, the list of those one follows on Twitter (now X), or maybe just a WhatsApp group. According to the traditional view, to escape an epistemic bubble just requires the addition of the missing information.<sup>1</sup> These, according to Nguyen, are less sinister than echo chambers which are structures from which voices have been deliberately excluded and actively discredited.

Drawing on work in the philosophy of language, Pollock argues that escaping an epistemic bubble is not as easy as acquiring information because epistemic bubbles don't just lack coverage reliability but constrain an agent's *interpretive resources* – the information that is required to elaborate upon the minimal content of assertions. This includes any information required to disambiguate terms, assign referents to indexicals, identify explicatures/implicatures, parameters of gradability; basically, any information that isn't determined by the surface form of the sentence. At the heart of Pollock's argument is the observation that utterance forms are radically underspecified when it comes to content and that our ability to recover information from them requires a considerable amount of ambient contextual clues. The result is that, if an interpreter doesn't have access to the same interpretive resources as a speaker, then the speaker can struggle to convey important bubble-bursting information. Pollock shows how attention to the role of contextual information in utterance interpretation can help shed light on the phenomena of context collapse and contextual discordance discussed in online epistemology. Further, she shows how the context of online communication renders traditional strategies of repair unavailable.

The internet has the capacity to put us in contact with expert sources more easily than ever before. At the same time, it has become harder to check the credentials of those we are talking to.

<sup>1</sup> 'Epistemic bubbles merely leave their members ignorant, but ignorance can be fixed with simple exposure' (Nguyen, 2020, p. 147).

Grace Paterson's paper 'Online Sock Puppetry, Conversational Distortion, and Community Infiltration' describes the potential of sock puppet accounts to undermine our epistemic heuristics online. Sock puppetry is 'the use of multiple online personas (under different pseudonyms) to engender the false belief that there are more and different participants involved in a conversation than there actually are'. As a form of pseudonymous speech, it is not unique to online communication (and was indeed a feature of the pamphleteering tradition), but the ease with which people can create multiple sock puppets online has a unique ability to undermine trust in online contexts. Offline, one of the best ways we have of epistemically evaluating a possible source is to see how others react to them. In Patterson's terms, we engage in 'epistemic crowdsourcing'. This is exactly the heuristic that sock puppetry undermines. In her paper, Patterson explains how sock puppetry is conceptually distinct from the use of fake and 'alt' accounts, and how it threatens this default epistemic tool. Indeed, sock puppets can play an important role, not just in the construction of echo chambers, but in the epistemic bubbles discussed earlier.

Finally, Joshua Habgood-Coote's paper considers how our engagement with the internet is structured and shaped by search engines. While the internet was once conceptualised as an independent cyberspace, free from social forces and structures like racism, work by Safiya Noble and others has shown how the infrastructure of the internet can support existing forms of structural oppression. Combining ideas from Noble, Charles Mills, and Jessie Munton, Habgood-Coote's paper argues that search engines such as Google should be understood as socio-technical systems that 'contribute to a system of white ignorance'. While search engines can render vast amounts of knowledge accessible to their users, Habgood-Coote encourages us to think about how they also contribute to ignorance production. Rejecting the idea that search engines should be viewed as artificial testifiers, the paper follows Noble and Munton in arguing that search engines are information classification systems that organise bodies of knowledge in accordance with our inquiries. While these search engines present themselves as objective and neutral systems for classifying information, Habgood-Coote's paper identifies a range of cases in which Google manifests racist biases through the provision of false information, the production of controlling images (e.g. biased image searches), and the direction of inquisitive attitudes (e.g. auto-complete). These all serve to make google search an *oppressive technology* (in the sense outlined by Liao & Heubner, 2020). In the final section, Habgood-Coote outlines some general principles for a

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social epistemology of technology that takes account how digital technologies productively interact with social institutions.

The papers in this issue are not strictly pessimistic about the internet and neither do they suggest that the problems discussed are unique to online contexts. Rather, they are attentive to the aesthetic and epistemic potential value the internet provides. What they do encourage is both thoughtfulness and vigilance in our navigation of online spaces. In the words of Paterson's paper, 'a person's ability to successfully and, indeed, responsibly navigate online social spaces relies on them having a solid grasp of that space's structural features.' We hope that this issue goes some way to helping readers develop such a grasp.

### References

- Shen-yi Liao and Bryce Huebner, 'Oppressive Things', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 103:1 (2020), 92–113.
- C. Thi Nguyen, 'Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles', *Episteme*, 17:2 (2020), 141–61.

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